

Partnership

On March 27, 1998, an agreement was signed forming a unique new partnership dedicated to helping communities throughout the state of Washington improve their physical and cultural environments. The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program of the National Park Service joined with the Washington Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects (WASLA) to provide no-fee technical assistance to RTCA projects.



The RTCA program, a technical assistance program of the National Park Service, is committed to helping build community-driven partnerships that conserve natural and cultural resources and provide recreational opportunities at the local level.

The program does not provide financial assistance but shares the professional expertise of staff planners, landscape architects and resource specialists with local and regional conservation partners across the country. The RTCA office in Seattle serves the states of Idaho, Oregon and Washington.

The mission of the American Society of Landscape Architects is to lead, to educate and to participate in the careful stewardship, wise planning and artful design of our cultural and natural environments. Landscape architects strive to realize a balance among preservation, use and management of the country's resources.

Members of WASLA have volunteered their skills, individually and as part of the organization's community stewardship program, to many projects throughout the state, such as neighborhood playgrounds and gardens, environmental education centers and Habitat for Humanity houses.

This third RTCA/WASLA partnership project came together in Skagit County in 2001, and both organizations look forward to working with many other Washington communities — east and west, urban, suburban and rural — in the coming years.

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2001 COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE Partnership



SKAGIT COUNTY, WASHINGTON

National Park Service
Rivers, Trails & Conservation
Assistance Program
...
Seattle, Washington



American Society of
Landscape Architects
...
Washington State
Chapter



Charette participants worked over an intense but creative weekend on a plan to convert the working farm of the old Northern State mental health facility to a premier recreation site. Heavy emphasis was placed upon preserving and protecting the natural, cultural, and historical resources of the site. Plans call for the unique architectural detail of some of the buildings on the site, as depicted in this drawing of an existing dairy barn, to be preserved and incorporated into the planned facilities of the recreation site.

Community Assistance

Neighborhoods, small towns, and community and regional groups sometimes face planning or design challenges that they are unable to meet due to a lack of expertise, direction, funding, or other resources. This new venture between the National Park Service and the Washington Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects gives communities a chance to benefit from the pairing of RTCA's organizational resources with the technical skills of WASLA's landscape architects.



RTCA and WASLA, in cooperation with community members, organize an event or series of events to generate ideas and potential solutions to the local challenges. One of the most effective vehicles for producing ideas with limited time and resources is the **design charrette**.

A charrette is generally an intensive, "illustrated brainstorming session" involving any number of people and lasting from a few hours to a few days. It is a tradition dating from the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris (in the early 20th Century), where professors would send a cart (*charrette*) around to pick up students' work at the submission deadline. Some students, frantic to complete their drawings, would jump onto the cart as it rolled down the street, hence, working "*en charrette*."

During a charrette, volunteer design professionals work to quickly grasp local problems and devise (and illustrate) solutions. The image of frenetic, last-minute drawing is common to today's charettes, which some describe as "organized chaos." The objective is high creativity and productivity. This intensity and confusion often yields fertile ideas that might not emerge in a slower, more controlled process.



The ideas generated during a charrette are often presented back to the community in a public forum of some kind. No idea is discarded due to impracticality or disputable details — these decisions are for the community to make later, after the dust of the event has settled.

Come see how the RTCA/WASLA charrette process worked for one Washington community...

A COMMUNITY DESIGN EVENT

How to transform a patchwork of fallow farmland and wetlands into the largest county-owned recreation area in the region? That was the challenge for a team of landscape architects, planners, biologists and other skilled volunteers who gathered one weekend for the Northern State Recreation Area charette, the third collaboration between RTCA and WASLA.



Located just outside the city of Sedro-Woolley in northwest Washington state, the 726-acre Northern State Recreation Area occupies the historic site of the Northern State Hospital working farm. Beginning in 1909, this farm employed up to 2200 workers — including patients — producing and processing food for the entire statewide hospital and prison system. State budget cuts finally forced the closure of the hospital and farm in 1973.



In 1991, Skagit County purchased the property from the State of Washington to develop a multi-use recreation facility to “serve the citizens of the county and beyond.” To that end, the County commissioned a resource classification study, followed by a conceptual master plan in 1994. But little progress was made on the site until a group of local citizens formed the Northern State Task Force in 1998 to work toward implementation of the master plan. The County Board of Commissioners earmarked funding to get the project started.

In August, 2000, Skagit County Parks and Recreation (SCPR) applied for technical assistance from RTCA. Once the project was selected, the two agencies worked with the Task Force, and a citizen advisory committee to gather new site information, survey local citizens for their recreation preferences, and revisit the 1994 master plan, which needed revising due to site changes and environmental restrictions. With this new information, SCPR and RTCA developed a new program of site elements. With help from WASLA, they then recruited volunteer landscape architects, planners, biologists, engineers and other professionals to join local citizens in a charette over the weekend of October 19-21, 2001, to create a new preliminary master plan.



Volunteers arriving on Friday evening for the charette were greeted by SCPR staff and toured the site, spread along a glacial terrace at the edge of the Skagit River floodplain. The old farm is a quilt of wetland, dry meadow and forested upland, divided by two salmon-spawning streams, and is surrounded by outstanding mountain views. There is a complex of dairy barns built in 1921, as well as scattered farm structures in variable condition. After a rainy week, the sun came out just in time for volunteers to not merely examine, but enjoy the pastoral setting. Introductions were brief as team members launched into questions and discussions of what they saw.

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Produced by the National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program and the Washington Chapter, American Society of Landscape Architects. Design by Gilchrist LanDesign. Photos courtesy of RTCA. Printed on recycled paper.



Results

The designs developed at the Northern State Recreation Area (NSRA) charette formed the basis of a final master plan. Prior to the charette, several key stakeholders had conflicting views of how the site should be developed. Some parties wanted to create developed recreation facilities such as ball fields. Others wanted to focus on restoring the natural resources and providing open space. Another group was pressing for the development of rodeo/fairgrounds, while yet another wanted to see an events center created. Through the dynamic and interactive group design process, interest groups were able to work collectively to collaborate on solutions to problems of space and resources, and come to consensus on a single visual concept design which met the needs of all the stakeholders.

The charette made it possible for the public to visualize the recommended developments in the concept plan. As a result, public support for the project began to swell. With the support of the key stakeholders and citizens, Skagit County's Park and Recreation Department (SCPR) and its planning partners found that developing a final concept plan was relatively easy. Less than three months after the charette, Skagit County Commissioners endorsed the NSRA plan and recommended its adoption into the County's Comprehensive Plan. With the support of local environmental groups and recreation advocates, SCPR envisions environmental and County permitting will go smoother. In addition, the charette process and results will ultimately enable Skagit County to realize greater success when seeking implementation funds.



NSRA Master Plan compiled by Patrik Dylan, Skagit County Parks & Recreation Department

SKAGIT COUNTY, WASHINGTON

The evening's orientation culminated in a dinner (expertly cooked and served by State Job Corps youth) and program with team members, involved citizens and guests held in the ornate meeting hall of the old Hospital grounds. SCPR and Task Force members presented an in-depth overview of the site and history of the project. Local leaders voiced hopes and concerns, and messages of support and encouragement from state leaders, including Governor Gary Locke and U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell, were read to the assembly.

Fueled with the information and enthusiasm of the night before — and with food provided by local Soroptimist and Rotary clubs — the five designated teams gathered Saturday morning in the Sedro-Woolley Community and Senior Center to tackle the plan. Each team was asked to sketch out a broad plan for the site and present it to the rest of the group for comments. Then each team spent the afternoon generating ideas its particular program element — trails, baseball/softball fields, campgrounds, interpretive elements, and special facilities (including an equestrian/multi-use facility and an interpretive center). Some teams took additional site tours to see how their ideas might work on the ground.



The fragile interconnectedness of site elements was evident as designers visited one another's teams to see how each design affected the other before making final decisions. At one point, a passionate group debate emerged over the location (and appropriateness) of facilities for recreational vehicles. Nearly everyone had an opinion, regardless of their team's focus. However awkward and stressful it may have been, team members recognized the discussion as a necessary part of the charette process. After the weekend, one volunteer acknowledged, “I've been involved in many collaborative efforts in the past; however, none were as creative and productive as this one.”



The teams reconvened Sunday morning to refine their maps, sketches, outlines and lists, and prepare oral presentations for a community open house that afternoon. Over 40 citizens braved an autumn rainstorm to see and hear the teams' recommendations (and win some rather creative raffle prizes). Many attendees commented on the number of solid ideas produced in one short weekend. Skagit County's commitment to making the new plan a reality was illustrated by one County commissioner, who stood up to say, “it may be like eating an elephant — one bite at a time — but I guarantee we can get it done on this site.”



“The team-oriented nature of the charette provided us with a single concept plan by achieving consensus amongst stakeholders who appeared to be at odds with one another.”

- Bob Vaux, Skagit County Parks & Recreation Director